

# Jewish Religious Groups

## Pharisees

The headline beside shows how the French would not like their culture to be 'Americanised'. They want to preserve their distinctive French culture against American influences.

FRENCH RESENT INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

PROTESTS AT DISNEYLAND IN PARIS

FRENCH SAY 'NON' TO FAST FOOD



*Pharisee at prayer*

Now let's go back two centuries before Christ. Instead of 'Americanisation' there was 'Hellenisation' – the cultural and religious influence of all things Greek. A group of strict Jews emerged who resisted any Greek influences - especially religious influences. They were called 'the separate ones' or Pharisees. By the time of Jesus there were perhaps 6000 Pharisees dedicated to keeping the Jewish Law down to its finest detail.

## The two Torahs

Imagine that in a park there are three written signs: 'Do not pick the flowers', 'Dogs must be kept on leads', and 'No cycling off the cycle path.' As you enter the park, a park attendant gives you three instructions: 'Keep your hands in your pockets as you walk past the flower beds', 'No dogs are allowed', and 'Cyclists walk with your bikes through the park.' You'll see that the spoken rules back up the written rules and make it impossible to break them, even by accident.

The Pharisees had such great reverence for the written Torah that they kept to a 'spoken law' that would protect and fence off the written law, making it impossible to break even by accident. This was 'the oral tradition of the elders' – a sort of second Torah. It was reputedly passed down through elders right through from the time of Moses.



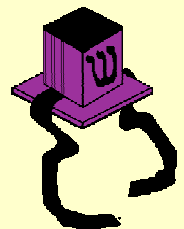
## What did ordinary people think of the Pharisees?

Ordinary people respected Pharisees for their devotion and commitment. Remember, most Pharisees weren't 'professional religious men' like the Jewish priests; Pharisees usually had to have an ordinary livelihood to make ends meet. Even so, they still

- fasted twice a week (on Mondays and Thursdays), doing without any food or water on those days;
- prayed at length at least three times a day;
- paid a tenth of all their earnings to the Temple treasury

### Did you know ...?

At the start of a working day, it was the custom for Jewish men to pray with small leather boxes called **phylacteries** strapped to the forehead and left arm.



These boxes contained folded passages of scripture. This follows Moses' command to fasten God's word to the hand and forehead and to the doorposts and gates (cf. Deut 6:8-9)

Jesus criticised the Pharisees for wearing especially broad phylacteries as a sign of their extra (outward) piety.

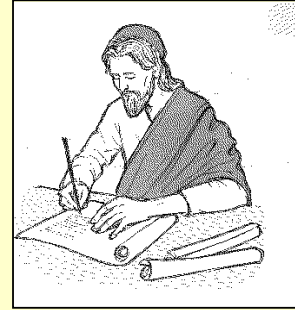
## Scribes

Scribe simply means 'writer'. This gives no hint of the scribe's importance in the ancient world. The kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon needed their scribes to keep written records, collect and copy writings, and so on. In terms of importance, ancient scribes would be roughly equivalent to a computer software expert who can construct and operate sophisticated databases for government.

The Jewish Kingdoms needed their scribes too. Scribes are mentioned in the reigns of King David and King Solomon. They became important in the world where few could write. Originally scribes were responsible for making faithful copies of the scriptures and for guarding the text against any errors. Gradually they came to be seen as the experts in the religious Law, adding comments and interpretations of their own. Most scribes belonged to the party of the Pharisees.

In Jesus' day, a Jewish man would have trained in a special school from the age of thirteen until the age of thirty in order to be considered a trained scribe. This is why they are sometimes called 'lawyers' or 'teachers of the law'. Jesus complained that they often misinterpreted it (cf. Mk 12: 38).

### Did you know ...?



Very strict rules applied to the copying of the Hebrew sacred books. The parchment had to be made from ritually pure animals. Imperfectly made copies of the sacred books had to be burnt. The strictest rules applied to the writing of the Holy Name of God. If a king were to speak to the scribe whilst writing the Holy Name, he was not to look up until having finished the sacred word. Before writing the Holy Name, the scribe had to recharge his pen with ink so as not to run out in the middle of writing the Holy Name.

## Why were the scribes and Pharisees the 'bad guys' in the Gospels?

It's true that Jesus clashed with them (Mk 2:16,18,24, 3:6), but it is also true that

- some scribes and Pharisees welcomed his message;
- Jesus clashed with other religious groups too;
- Jesus shared some of the beliefs of the Pharisees (e.g. about the resurrection of the Dead);
- some Pharisees (like Saul/Paul) became Christians and leading lights of the early Church.

It is understandable that the Pharisees were opposed to Jesus for he criticised them for spending so much time keeping the letter of the Law that they had forgotten how to care for the needs of people (see chapter 6). For example, the questions beside were discussed as part of keeping the Sabbath holy and doing no work.

## Sadducees



A man called Zadok was the High Priest at the time of King Solomon, about 950 BC. In Jerusalem, a group of priestly families claimed direct descent from Zadok: 'Zadokites', or Sadducees. The Sadducees were priests, some Chief Priests, and one the High Priest. They were the upper class in Jewish society with cosmopolitan lifestyles open to Greek and Roman influences. They controlled Temple worship, sacrifices and finances. They were heavily represented in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish 'Supreme Court'. Because they had carved out a pleasant existence they were happy to remain exactly as they were under the Romans. They were content, therefore, to work in co-operation with the Romans. St Mark's Gospel makes only one direct reference to this group, and yet it did much to concentrate opposition against Jesus in the final days of his ministry.

## Why did the Sadducees oppose Jesus?

It's easy when you think about it. Any threat to the running of the Temple, to the way things were, to the nice arrangement between the Sadducees and the Romans, would be taken as a direct threat to the Sadducees. Jesus would have enraged the Sadducees by his action in driving out the traders and moneychangers (cf. Mk 11). Even before this, the Sadducees would surely have heard of his dangerous new teachings, of how some proclaimed him the Messiah, of his ministry amongst the ordinary people and the outcasts.

## What did others think of the Sadducees?

Ordinary Jews would have had little time or respect for these wealthy, privileged and distant representatives of their religion. Many like the Pharisees thought them far too cosy with the occupying Romans. Pharisees also had major religious disputes with the Sadducees. The religious differences are summarised in the table.

Teachings accepted as sacred authority	Pharisees	Sadducees	Jesus
Torah (Five Books of Moses)	✓	✓	✓
Oral Tradition of the Jewish elders:	✓	✗	✓✗
extra regulations	✓	✗	✓✗
belief in angels	✓	✗	✓
belief in resurrection of the dead	✓	✗	✓

## What happened to the Sadducees?

It's very simple: destroy the Temple and you destroy the Sadducee power base and therefore you destroy the Sadducees as a group. When the Jews rose up against the Romans in 70 AD, the Romans brutally suppressed them and destroyed the Temple. The Sadducees lost influence and disappeared as a group.

## Other Groups

### Zealots

Zealot means 'fanatic'. About what were Jewish Zealots fanatical? Their Jewish faith and the right to practice it and live in a Jewish land free from foreign oppressors. To the Romans they were terrorists; to other Jews they may have been admired as religious freedom fighters and patriots. They aimed to rid the country of pagan Roman rule once and for all—even by using violence. They were sometimes known as 'sicarii' – daggersmen, after the daggers they concealed in their clothing.

Jesus chose a Zealot to be one of the Twelve: Simon the Zealot. Barabbas, the man released instead of Jesus, may well have had connections with the Zealots, as perhaps did Judas Iscariot, Jesus' betrayer.

*Masada in the Judaeen desert... the place of the last stand of the Jewish resistance against Rome.*



### Did you know ...?

Led by the Zealots, the Jews rebelled against Roman rule in 66 AD. For a while, the rebellion was successful, until the remorseless legions of Rome turned the tide. In 70 AD Jerusalem and the beautiful Temple were razed to the ground.

The rebels' last stand was at Herod's seemingly impregnable fortress in Masada, built on a sheer-sided rock rising 300 feet above the Judaeen Desert.

They held out until 73 AD, when Roman military engineers built a ramp right up the top. When they broke through they found some 960 men, women and children dead. Rather than submit to Rome, they had committed mass suicide. Today, Israeli army recruits are given the oath of allegiance there.

## Tax Collectors (Publicans)

If Zealots were Jewish patriots, tax collectors were considered traitors to their own people. Their job was to collect taxes to support the Roman occupation force and its puppet rulers. Officials set tax collectors the amount of tax expected from a certain area; tax collectors charged their cut above this minimum. They also weren't too careful about working on the Sabbath. So, for working to support the Roman occupiers, for cheating ordinary people by charging excess tax and for Sabbath violation, tax collectors were considered outcasts from ordinary Jewish society.

Jesus chose a tax collector, Matthew or Levi, to be one of the Twelve. So since he chose both a Zealot and a Tax Collector to be among the Twelve, you wouldn't be surprised if he paired them off when he sent the disciples out in twos to preach (cf. Mk 6).



## Samaritans

At the time of Jesus, various groups inhabited Palestine. In the southern province of Judaea lived the descendants of Jacob's son Judah. Jesus and most of his disciples came from the northern province of Galilee. Between the two was Samaria, the land of the Samaritans. Both Northern and Southern Jews avoided the Samaritans because of their part Assyrian ancestry. A Jew travelling between Galilee and Judea would often cross the River Jordan and pass through pagan territory rather than pass through Samaria. Even so, Samaritans kept the religion of Abraham and Moses.



## Romans

Very few Roman soldiers would have come from in and around Rome. They would have been conscripts from various parts of the vast empire. Romans didn't conscript Jews into their legions; it would have been much more trouble than it was worth.

Most occupying soldiers would have understood Greek, some Latin, perhaps some grasped Aramaic, the local language of the Jews. Palestine might not have been the best posting for your average Roman conscript. *What a strange people with their fixation with one God! Why not have many gods like the rest of us? And so easily upset! Bring a statue or image or Roman standard anywhere near their holy place and they go mental. And those Zealots – a vicious lot!*

